Sloan Network Encyclopedia Entry

Family-Friendly Workplace (2002)

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Basic Concepts and Definitions

The terms "family-friendly workplace," "family-friendly company," and "family-friendly employer" refer to a workplace that, to some extent, acknowledges and responds to the work and personal/family responsibilities assumed by employees. Strachan and Burgess (1998) note, "... (a) 'family friendly workplace' is one which ... develops and implements policies that allow employees to simultaneously fulfill work and family responsibilities." (p. 251) The concept of a family-friendly workplace is usually conceptualized as a continuum, rather than a dichotomous variable.

Work-family leaders have identified four interrelated components to family-friendly workplaces:

1. benefits, policies and programs that promote employees' quality of life and work/life balance;
2. workplace cultures and climates that reflect "family" or employee-centered assumptions and beliefs;
3. workplace relationships (e.g., with supervisors and coworkers) that are respectful of employees' work-family and work/life responsibilities; and
4. work processes, systems, and structures/practices that keep the dual agenda (e.g., beneficial outcomes both for the organization and for employees) in the forefront.

Benefits, Programs & Policies: Benefits, policies, and programs are, perhaps, the most visible indicators of a family-friendly workplace. This aspect of an employer's work/life initiative is sometimes considered to be the "benefits approach to work/life." Family-friendly policies and programs have been categorized in various ways (see, for example, Lobel & Kossek, 1996). Although there is no single, widely-accepted approach to the classification of work-family policies and programs, it is possible to organize them into six basic groups:

- dependent care supports (e.g., information and referral, subsidies, child care programs, elder care supports, etc.);
- flexible work options (e.g., flexible scheduling, work-at-home options, etc.);
• family and personal leaves (e.g., paid parental leave; sabbaticals, etc.);

• options for maximizing time and money resources (e.g., discount programs, assistance with preschool tuition, concierge services, etc.);

• education and training (e.g., work/life planning, seminars pertaining to specific work/life issues such as helping dependent children apply to college, etc.); and

• conventional provisions for job quality and compensation/benefits (e.g., "family-wage," health insurance, long-term care insurance, unemployment insurance, career development options, etc.).

Workplace Culture and Climate: The salient values and attitudes at the workplace affect virtually every aspect of employer-sponsored work-family initiatives, including: the organization's adoption of different initiatives (see Pitt-Catsouphes et al., 1995), perceptions of the strategic importance of the initiatives, and the utilization of particular work-family policies, such as gradual return to work after family leave. Employees might feel that it would be too risky to use some of the benefits that are available (e.g., reduced hours) if they are concerned that their careers and/or workplace relationships could be jeopardized as a result (see Judiesch & Lyness, 1999). Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) developed a 20-item Work-Family Culture and found that employees' perceptions of a supportive organizational culture were positively related to utilization of work-family benefits. In addition, a supportive culture was positively related to employees' affective commitment and negatively related to work-family conflict and intentions to leave the organization. Most importantly, they found that a supportive work-family culture was predictive of work attitudes above and beyond the availability of work-family benefits.

Other studies also suggest that employees' perceptions of supportive workplace cultures are related to important employee and family outcomes, such as work-family balance and life satisfaction (see Litchfield & Pitt-Catsouphes, 1999). Some workplaces have introduced training programs for supervisors/managers as a way to promote a family-friendly culture.

Workplace Relationships: Several studies have found that employees' perceptions of the "family-friendliness" of their workplaces reflects the informal social supports connected to the relationships that employees develop at the workplace, especially those with their supervisors and coworkers (see Allen, 2001; Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998; and Kossek & Nichol, 1995).

Work Systems, Processes, and Practices: The fourth component of the family-friendly company is tied to the work itself (see Appelbaum, 2000). Rapaport and her colleagues conducted a ground-breaking study linking work-family experiences to work redesign. The investigators of this study articulated two reasons why work/life champions should pay close attention to the very nature of the work itself (Rapoport et al., 1996). In the first place, employers and supervisors tend to be more supportive of work-family strategies
when they are connected to core businesses objectives. The linkage to work redesign can help move work-family from the periphery of business practices to a more integral and strategic position. Secondly, work inefficiencies and unquestioned assumptions about work processes may create significant challenges to employees' abilities to achieve work/life balance. For example, businesses that respond to variations in business cycles by requiring mandatory overtime may create hardships for employees. Therefore, improvements in work processes may mitigate and/or prevent some types of work/life conflicts.

There has been controversy about the use of the term, "family-friendly" workplace. The concerns expressed are similar to those associated with the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). Many have commented on the constraints imposed when the word "family" is attached to the concept of a responsive workplace, principally because this term suggests to some the 1950s image of the two-parent, male breadwinner/female housewife family structure (see also discussion in Strachan & Burgess, 1998).

**Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies**

The United States has relied on employer-sponsored work/life initiatives as the key strategy for providing the supports needed by working families. Employers who have established work-family or work/life initiatives usually anticipate that they will have a positive impact on the "bottom line". These employers view work/life initiatives as strategies that can help them recruit and retain talented employees, remain competitive with the benefits offered by other employers, and enhance employee performance and productivity (see, for example, Catalyst, 2000, Catalyst, 1998, Catalyst, 1997).

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

The descriptive information about family-friendly workplaces addresses two important issues: the operationalization of the concept of family-friendly workplace and the prevalence of different types of work-family initiatives.

*The Corporate Reference Guide to Work-Family Programs*, published by the Families and Work Institute (Galinsky, Friedman, and Hernandez, 1991), details measurable indicators of the family-friendly workplace within a developmental framework. Based on the findings of organizational studies, Galinsky et al. suggest that there are three basic stages associated with the development of family-friendly initiatives:

1. Developing a Programmatic Response;
2. Developing an Integrated Approach;
3. Changing the Culture.
The Corporate Reference Guide describes The Family-Friendly Index, a tool that can be used to ascertain a company's family-friendliness. The Family-Friendly Index assesses the availability of alternative work schedules, leaves and time-off, family-oriented benefits, supports for dependent care (childcare and elder care), and other initiatives (e.g., EAPs, management training, etc.) at the workplace. This inventory has been widely used to compare the progress that individual workplaces have made toward becoming more family-friendly.

Corporate members of the Work & Family Roundtable at Boston College developed "Principles of Excellence of Work" (1996) as a statement of the members' vision of the characteristics of a family-friendly workplace. The Roundtable focused its work on four principles:

1. The employer recognizes the strategic value of addressing work and personal life issues.
2. The work environment supports individual work and personal life effectiveness.
3. The management of work and personal life effectiveness is a shared responsibility between employer and employee.
4. The employer develops relationships to enhance external work and personal life resources.

Most of the documentation of the prevalence of work-family initiatives has focused on trends in employers' adoption of specific types of policies and programs. Clearly, it has been more difficult to track changes in the other three aspects of work-family initiatives (e.g., workplace culture, relationships at the workplace, and work redesign) because the indicators of these changes are often informal rather than formal. Researchers, consultants, and government agencies have been interested in documenting the availability of work-family policies and programs at US workplaces.

As part of its Survey of Employee Benefits, the Bureau of Labor Statistics gathers data about employees' access to specific work-family policies and programs. According to the findings of the 1997 survey, the percentage of full-time employees in the US have access to work-family policies and programs include: 20% have access to paid personal leave, 93% have access to unpaid family leave (note the exemptions as specific in the Family and Medical Leave Act) and 2% have access to paid family leave, 10% have access to some type of child care support, and 10% have access to adoption assistance (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999).

In 1998, Galinsky & Bond conducted a national survey of 1,057 workplaces with 100+ employees. Among their findings, Galinsky & Bond report:
• 68% of the organizations reported that they periodically allow employees to change their starting and quitting times;

• 81% allow employees to return to work gradually after childbirth;

• 55% allow employees to periodically work at home;

• 53% provide at least some income replacement during maternity leave;

• 13% provide at least some income replacement during paternity leave;

• 36% provide access to information to help locate childcare in the community;

• 9% offer child care at or near the worksite;

• 50% offer dependent care assistance pretax accounts; and

• 43% train their supervisors in responding to work-family needs of employees.

Implications for Practice and Research

The media has focused significant attention on the efforts of large, for-profit corporations to establish work/life initiatives. Some studies have profiled the responsiveness of small businesses (see, for example, Pitt-Catsouphes and Litchfield, 2001; MacDermid et al., 1994; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1995), public sector agencies (see, for example, Durst, 1999), and non profit firms (see Sweet, 2000). It may be important for work-family leaders to consider whether it is appropriate to develop different sets of workplace responses for small businesses, public sector agencies, and nonprofits than those used for large corporations.

References


Rapoport, Rhona; Bailyn, Lotte with Kolb, Deborah; Fletcher, Joyce; Friedman, Dana E.; Eaton, Susan; Harvey, Maureen; & Miller, Barbara. (1996). *Relinking Life and Work: Toward a Better Future*. http://www.cpn.org/sections/topics/work/index.html


**Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:**


**Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies**

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. ([More about the Matrix ...](#)).

Concepts related to adult development are relevant to all of the "Individual" domains in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Study. In addition, theories of adult development are relevant to Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings.

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry's topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.
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**Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains**
Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the work-family area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.
Process

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu

Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:
1. Our use of the word "family" refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term "work-family" to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word "family" continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word "family" to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver/caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.

Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:
1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

**Work-Family Experiences:** The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

**Antecedents:** Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
- Workplace Antecedents
- Community Antecedents
- Societal Antecedents

**Covariates:** The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see
Column C in Table 1).

- Individual Covariates
- Family Covariates
- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
- Societal Covariates

**Decisions and Responses:** The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
- Workplace Decisions and Responses
- Community Decisions and Responses
- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

**Outcomes & Impacts:** The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
- Outcomes & Impacts on Families
- Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
- Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
- Outcomes & Impacts on Society

**Theoretical Foundations:** The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
### Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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